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ABSTRACT

Developmental writing students pose particular problems for composition instruction because of their pragmatic orientation and because they come from and live in an oral, nonliterate culture. The writing instructor must create writing situations that make real-world demands and bring about real-world consequences, and assign topics that students can clearly see as contributing to their education. Writing situations in the developmental writing classroom must work toward these goals: (1) engage students in general or abstract thinking and the logical organization of ideas; (2) encourage students to pursue new knowledge; and (3) focus students' attention on writing as language, so that they see their writing from the editor's point of view. Realistic writing situations can be established in the classroom by means of an in-class magazine to which all students are required to contribute articles and editorial services. Compensation for publication is grade points for articles selected by student editorial boards. Teacher-selected topics should be contemporary social issues and should be problematic, with both sides defensible. Supplementary reading assignments will ensure a common body of knowledge. This magazine method allows students to deal closely with their writing and with that of others, and to experience the complete writing process, focusing attention on editing skills and providing students with a purpose for writing. Furthermore, it allows students to construct and examine opinions on important social issues, thus contributing to their general education. (HTH)

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WRITING FOR PUBLICATION IN DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH

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One of the reasons that teaching in a developmental writing classroom is so often frustrating--and challenging--is that developmental students often lack the academic skills and particularly, the attitudes which instructors expect, and often presume, in their students (Shaughnessy, 1977, pp. 2-3). Developmental students seem not to possess the motivations of traditional students. They seem as a group not to be impressed by deferred gratification, nor to be committed to their own success, nor to be bound by punctuality, schedules, or devotion to detail. And as a group they lack the ability to read with comprehension, to categorize, to generalize, and to reason abstractly.

These are some of the characteristics that distinguish developmental students from traditional college students. And so, of course, these are some of the characteristics that distinguish developmental students from ourselves. For, it seems to practically all of us that we have always possessed the traditional academic attitudes and abilities, and we have in fact been so successful in using them that we have chosen to live our lives in the academic environment.

As a result, there is a disparity between the attitudes of

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developmental writing instructors and the attitudes of their students. Our attitudes and skills come easily to us and seem natural. And so, we must make a conscious effort to understand the apparently different attitudes and skills of our students.

In this paper I will discuss two of these divergences of attitude and skill. I will treat them as problems for the developmental writing instructor. Then I will present at length a practical technique for attacking these problems. This technique is an application of the peer criticism approach. (See James, 1981, for references.) As such, there is little that is novel about it. But I hope to show that the technique allows the developmental writing course not only to strengthen the student's basic writing skills but also to promote the student's general education.

The first characteristic of developmental students that I would like to observe is their pragmatism. By and large they are practical and situation-oriented people. Although they often have excessively high educational goals for themselves, they tend to judge the worth of any academic work by whether and to what extent that work produces practical academic results or clearly fulfills their goals and expectations.

This attitude conflicts with the nature of composition courses, including developmental writing courses. Composition courses have no subject matter. They intend to develop skills in the students. Whatever conceptual content they have is not

presented for itself--that is, for the sake of knowledge--but rather to foster the practice of the skills. For example, we do not teach grammar as an abstract body of knowledge but rather as an analytical tool by which to identify and correct writing errors.

There are two consequences of this lack of subject matter. First, some students react to what conceptual content the course does have as though it were the content of the course. For example, they memorize definitions and study for quizzes, although they may not use this knowledge in their own writing or editing. They do so in order to "learn the material" and to get good grades on the tests, because that is their expectation of what a course should be. They are disoriented in a course without conceptual content and try to treat it as though it had such content.

The second and more important consequence of this lack of content is that composition courses do not generate subjects for writing. Instructors must search beyond the course for topics which lend themselves to the composition lesson and which interest the students. But since instructors can rely on no common core of knowledge among the students, topics are often either personal or else trivial in terms of the students' educational goals. That is, although the students come to college expecting to learn new and perhaps exotic knowledge, in their developmental writing classes they are often asked to write on familiar or trivial topics which do not extend their knowledge. They have little enthusiasm for this, and they

direct their energies then solely toward the grade.

The conclusion is that developmental writing students often do not see value in the work that they do in the developmental writing classes. They do not see a connection between writing and the fulfillment of their educational goals, which are primarily occupational. Nor do they appreciate the abstract and absolute value of writing, our sermons claiming such value notwithstanding. Nor do they see the benefit to be derived from writing on topics which neither expand their knowledge nor help complete their curriculum coursework.

In order to attack this problem, the developmental writing instructor must create a writing situation which makes real-world demands and brings about real-world consequences. For students accustomed to failure, the threat of poor grades, although a real-world consequence, is not strong enough to motivate them to perform well on artificial exercises. The writing situation must transcend exercise and reflect somehow the practical world.

Moreover, the developmental writing instructor must create topics which the students can clearly see as contributing to their educations. These topics need not focus on the occupational realm, for, in my College and I presume in most others as well, students have as their second priority, next only to occupational training, the desire to become broadly educated people (Skulicz, 1983). And although our students often write in a fourth-grade style, they nonetheless possess adult minds capable of mature and often penetrating thought

(Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 292). Writing topics must therefore encourage them to thought and to research. They expect and demand no less.

The second of the two characteristics of developmental students that I would like to observe is that by and large, they come from and live in an oral, non-literate cultural setting. The primary carrier of information is speech. The written word, and especially, the printed word is much less pervasive in the lives of our students than it is in our own. Because our lives are filled with books, we often assume certain attitudes and mental processes to be natural which are in fact the conventions of a literate culture. And we expect our students to exhibit these attitudes and processes although the students derive from a non-literate culture and are thus unfamiliar with these conventions.

This is a very large problem and beyond the scope of this paper. But there are three aspects of the problem which are relevant here.

First, there are few models in the non-literate setting for generalized or abstract thinking, or for logical organization of ideas. These intellectual habits seem to be instilled by books and bookish people. The preferred mode of non-literate thinking seems to be narrative, and analysis tends to be of concrete situations and events.

Second, non-literate students tend to be uninformed. The accessibility of books encourages broad knowledge and

consequently the desire to be broadly knowledgeable. On the other hand, in a non-literate culture attention tends to focus on local events and immediate situations.

The third feature of a non-literate culture, and the feature that creates the central problem in developmental writing courses, is that non-literate students have little awareness of language as language. For them, language is primarily a vehicle for expression and for social cohesion. It is rarely observed as an entity. As a result, non-literate writing students have no experience with consciously manipulating the language or with the focusing on the details of written language that editing and proofreading require.

The problem here, then, is that non-literate students do not possess the attitudes and skills which derive from familiarity with books. As developmental writing instructors, we cannot presume that our students have these attitudes or skills, nor blame them for not having them. But in addition, we cannot hope adequately to teach our students the fundamental skill of editing, which depends on a familiarity with the conventions of the written language, without taking on the larger task of introducing them into the culture of the written word, the mind-set which we as educated people share.

Thus, an attack on this problem involves creating a writing situation in the classroom that has three features. It must first engage the student in general or abstract thought, organized in a logical way. Second, it must encourage the student to pursue knowledge and to become informed about the

world beyond his personal sphere. And third, it must force the student to focus attention on his writing as language. It must force him to see his writing with the eyes of an editor.

What we are after, then, in the abstract, is a writing situation which creates real-world demands on and real-world consequences for the writer; and also brings the writer into the world of knowledge, of abstract, logical thought, and of consciousness of language.

There are at least three ways to deal with this problem of artificiality, that is, to respond to the students' demand for a real-world writing situation. The first is to approximate practical writing situations by simulation. In one such attempt--the "Canisius Project" (Schroeder and Sroka, 1983)--, scenarios are created based on actual writing situations in business, and students are required to respond within those scenarios to actual pieces of business writing.

The second way is to participate in real-world situations by letter writing: to legislators, newspaper editors, the instructor herself, and so on.

The third way is to establish a real writing situation in the classroom itself. This is the approach taken in this paper. The vehicle for doing this is an in-class magazine to which all students in the course are required to contribute not only articles but also editing services. The magazine is published in my course six times a semester. During the publication cycle for each issue, the class is divided into four groups of four to

six students each. Each group reviews the articles written by its own members and selects the one article from the group to be published in the magazine. Thus, a competition is established which is analogous to the real-world publishing situation.

The compensation for publication in the magazine--the "currency" in this small economy, if you will--is grade points. The writer of each article that is published receives additional points toward his or her grade. In my course this grading procedure works as follows. Each student's article is graded on a scale of ten by me after the editing boards have made their decisions. In addition, the required revision of the paper is scored on a scale of ten. Thus, each article may receive a maximum of twenty points. Publication of the article in the magazine nets its author an additional ten points, regardless of the scores the article receives from me. Thus, publication in the magazine can considerably enhance a student's total grade for the paper. And since students are competing with one another rather than wrestling against some ideal paper in the instructor's mind, the situation offers a real hope of success. The students tend to take the opportunity seriously.

In practice, this method depends for its success on easy access to duplicating services. At my college, I am blessed with free use of duplicating machines. I am blessed as well with an efficient and cooperative secretary who has a knack for discovering reliable work-study students. Thus, I have available sufficient personnel and hardware so that my classes may keep to a rigorous publication schedule.

The publication schedule begins in the fourth week of the semester, after some preliminary writing assignments. It consists of a series of six cycles of five class-meetings each. This cycle is arranged to accommodate the duplication processes and to allow the students adequate time to write. On the first day, the students turn in their articles and then hear a lecture on the course material. For the sake of the duplicating process I insist that articles be written in ink, and I impose a strict upper limit on the length of the articles. For this course (the first in a two-course developmental writing sequence) the limit is two pages of writing. After the class I divide the articles into packets: one for each group or "editing board," as we call them. I have enough copies of each packet made so that each member of each editing board will receive a copy of his board's packet.

In the second class of the cycle the editing boards meet. The boards have two purposes: first, to read and discuss each article in the packet, and second, on the basis of the discussion to select the one article that will be published in the magazine. This is the crucial work in the course; it is at this time that the students exercise their editing skills in concert, trading knowledge about writing mechanics and insight into writing techniques. So let us look more closely at the editing board process.

Since each member of each editing board receives his own copy of the packet, each article in the packet can be read simultaneously by each member. Immediately after each article

is read, it is discussed by the group. There are strict rules for the discussion. It is not permitted that students discuss the content of the articles themselves or comment on the validity of the ideas. Rather, the editing boards are charged with discussing two aspects of each article: first, whether and how effectively the ideas are communicated; and second, where and how the writing is incorrect. Thus, the group discussions focus strictly on the writing as writing, rather than as expression.

In order to keep the discussions on track and to create an accountability situation, as well as to monitor the work of the groups, I require each group to appoint a secretary who records the corrections that the group identifies, on one of the packets and submits it to me at the end of the class.

Toward the end of the class session, each editing board selects the article that will be published. They do so by vote, and it is easy to imagine that this is one of the more difficult parts of the process. Students are forced to evaluate each other's writing critically and to defend their own writing on its merits as writing. Although often asked, especially at the beginning of the semester, I do not participate in the decision-making process at all. Nonetheless, I require that a decision be made. I do not allow a group not to choose an article for publication.

The benefits of this decision process are many. Foremost among them, of course, is that the students are made to view the writing critically. But also, the students get experience at

group decision-making, at compromise, and a' diplomacy. From my vantage point, the process is a wonderful o splay of group dynamics. And in additon, the groups rarely choose the articles of students who are not present for the discussion. This encourages attendance in class.

Once the articles have been selected, they are sent back to duplicating to be covered by a title page and stapled together as the magazines. They are copied in sufficient number so that there is a copy for every student in the class. To allow time for this process, I devote the third class in the cycle to lecture.

Copies of the magazine are distributed in the fourth class. As the students receive their copies, I make the assignment for the next issue. In addition, I return to them their original articles, corrected by me, for revision. I take the opportunity to devote this class to one-on-one tutorial, discussing the corrections and revisions with each student separately.

The fifth class in the cycle is given over to lecture. This allows the students at least four days to work on their articles for the next issue.

Thus, the method described here allows the students to deal closely with their own writing and the writing of others. The latter is important, of course, since it is much easier to find another's errors than one's own. In the process, the students' editing skills are strengthened and their powers of observation with respect to their writing are increased.

In addition, the method provides an active, "hands-on" way

of dealing with writing, which the students take to with more gusto than they do class lectures and workbook exercises. And finally, the method provides a real-world writing situation in microcosm, with its own demands and practical consequences, which the students involve themselves in and take seriously.

It remains to describe the contents of the articles, that is, the writing assignment itself. My view here is that since we are making a magazine in the class, it should function as a magazine, that is, it should provide a forum not only for the statement of ideas, but also for the discussion of the ideas. In order to accomplish this, I control the topics on which the students may write. The topics must conform to the following restrictions. First, they must be contemporary social issues about which there is general concern. That is, topics must transcend the interests of individuals and must be issues of general knowledge in our society. And second, the issues must be debatable: they must be problematic, and both sides must be defensible. In other words, the topics must offer the possibility of a real exchange of views in the magazine.

For the first issue of the semester, I offer the class three or four such topics. Students may write on any of them. Subsequently, the students are required to write their articles as responses to previously published articles. Since the students are not permitted to debate the issues orally in the editing board meetings, they are compelled to use the medium of writing to express their affirmations or objections to the

published arguments. This creates a situation in which the writing has a real purpose as expression and communication, and imitates the purpose of publication, say, in professional journals. Moreover, those components of the writing situation which are crucial in real-world writing but often lacking in classroom writing, namely, shared concern about the topic, impact on and feedback from a legitimate audience, and resultant personal prestige, are emphasized by this approach. The students become active participants in a closed community and experience every phase of the publication process: writer, editor, arbiter, reader, reactor. The instructor recedes in importance as a crucial figure in the classroom writing process and assumes the role of guide and advisor, as is fitting.

The only exception to the requirement that students write responses to previously published articles is that students may suggest additional topics. If the instructor judges that a proposed topic conforms to the restrictions cited above, then the class is offered the option of writing on the new topic in lieu of responding to previously published articles. It happens often that students become bored with the given topics. This option gives them relief, but in doing so, compels them to conceive of and construct viable topics on their own.

The objection might be raised that, given that the instructor cannot rely on a common body of shared knowledge among the developmental students, requiring students to write in an informed way on social issues is expecting too much of them.

To overcome this problem, the article-writing assignment is supplemented by a second assignment, in which students are required on a weekly basis to read published news articles of their choice and submit a short piece of writing on them. The material must be published in the printed press. The student's piece of writing must contain a documented summary of the article, a statement of a question of the student's not answered in the article, and a short attempt to answer the question or express an opinion on it. This assignment puts the students in direct contact with sources of information from which they may garner facts and form opinions on the in-class magazine topics. In addition, the students are taken on a tour of the library and shown how to use the appropriate reference works there.

This supplemental assignment provides several benefits to the student. It permits the student to exercise and develop his critical reading skills. It also forges a crucial link between reading and writing, and, especially if newsmagazines rather than newspapers are used, it offers the student high quality writing models. Moreover, it provides students who are often unaccustomed to doing so, the opportunity to read around and to explore and to indulge their intellectual curiosity. And finally, it offers them the broadening educational experience of becoming informed on contemporary social issues.

The classroom method which has been proposed in this paper

is not a sufficient solution to all the developmental writing instructor's problems. For example, it seems to have no effect on student attrition nor to yield higher average grades in the course. But it does accomplish several important objectives, and it does so within the framework of the general education of the student. Let us conclude by reflecting on these.

First, the method allows the student to experience the complete writing process from the inception of the idea to observing the impact of his writing on his audience. The student participates in each step of the process, not only as writer and editor of his own work, but also as editor, critic and audience of the writing of others. The student is in the position, then, to understand writing not only as self-expression but also as communication, and to become sensitive to the needs and demands of his audience.

Second, the method constructively focuses the attention of the students on the dominant concern in developmental writing classes: enhancing the students' editing skill, that is, their ability to see the writing as language. The accuracy of the student's writing is criticized from three directions. The student himself reviews and edits his writing during the composition process. (Required submission of rough drafts tends to insure this.) The instructor corrects and grades the writing from his Olympian perspective. And the students react to and criticize each others' work as peers, all struggling against the same writing problems. This threefold effort to develop editing skills may encourage the student to wrestle with those nasty and

nagging problems which alone he might be willing to let lie.

Third, the method provides the student with a purpose for his writing. Each student's writing, whether published or not, is a contribution to an on-going discussion in print of pressing issues. The print medium is made available to the student as a useful tool for probing and for arguing ideas. And as a result of this, the student has the opportunity to understand--because he has experienced it--a primary function of published writing in the world beyond the classroom, namely, to foster the process of dialectic by which we arrive at understanding.

And finally, the method allows the student to construct and to examine opinions on important issues in our society. It capitalizes on that enthusiasm of young adults to know the social problems of the time, to formulate solutions to them, and to embody their ideals in social programs and policies. It moves them to read in, and occasionally to research, the issues. It encourages them to think about, rather than simply to react mechanistically to, the issues being considered. It allows them to confront the difficulty of the problems and to understand the diversity of viewpoints from which the problems may be addressed. And for those students who are cloistered in the world of their immediate surroundings, the method offers an opportunity to break through and see a larger world beyond. For them it may be a broadening educational experience.

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